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Divorce — The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience

Evangelical Christians are gravely concerned about the family, and this is good and necessary. But our credibility on the issue of marriage is significantly discounted by our acceptance of divorce. To our shame, the culture war is not the only place that an honest confrontation with the divorce culture is missing. Divorce is now the scandal of the evangelical conscience.

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Mark A. Smith, who teaches political science at the University of Washington, pays close attention to what is now commonly called the “culture war” in America. Though the roots of this cultural conflict reach back to the 1960s, the deep divide over social and moral issues became almost impossible to deny during the late 1970s and ever since. It is now common wisdom to speak of “red” states and “blue” states and to expect familiar lines of division over questions such as abortion and homosexuality.



In the most general sense, the culture war refers to the struggle to determine laws and customs on a host of moral and political issues that separate Americans into two opposing camps, often presented as the religious right and the secular left. Though the truth is never so simple, the reality of the culture war is almost impossible to deny.

And yet, as Professor Smith surveyed the front lines of the culture war, he was surprised, not so much by the issues of hot debate and controversy, but by an issue that was obvious for its absence — divorce.

“From the standpoint of simple logic, divorce fits cleanly within the category of ‘family values’ and hence hypothetically could represent a driving force in the larger culture war,” he notes. “If ‘family values’ refers to ethics and behavior that affect, well, families, then divorce obviously should qualify. Indeed, divorce seems to carry a more direct connection to the daily realities of families than do the bellwether culture war issues of abortion and homosexuality.”

That logic is an indictment of evangelical failure and a monumental scandal of the evangelical conscience. When faced with this indictment, many evangelicals quickly point to the adoption of so-called “no fault” divorce laws in the 1970s. Yet, while those laws have been devastating to families (and especially to children), Smith makes a compelling case that evangelicals began their accommodation to divorce even before those laws took effect. No fault divorce laws simply reflected an acknowledgment of what had already taken place. As he explains, American evangelicals, along with other Christians, began to shift opinion on divorce when divorce became more common and when it hit close to home.

When the Christian right was organized in the 1970s and galvanized in the 1980s, the issues of abortion and homosexuality were front and center. Where was divorce? Smith documents the fact that groups such as the “pro-traditional family” Moral Majority led by the late Jerry Falwell generally failed even to mention divorce in their publications or platforms.

“During the 10 years of its existence, Falwell’s organization mobilized and lobbied on many political issues, including abortion, pornography, gay rights, school prayer, the Equal Rights Amendment, and sex education in schools,” he recalls. Where is divorce — a tragedy that affects far more families than the more “hot button” issues? “Divorce failed to achieve that exalted status, ranking so low on the group’s agenda that books on the Moral Majority do not even give the issue an

entry in the index.”

But the real scandal is far deeper than missing listings in an index. The real scandal is the fact that evangelical Protestants divorce at rates at least as high as the rest of the public. Needless to say, this creates a significant credibility crisis when evangelicals then rise to speak in defense of marriage.

As for the question of divorce and public law, Smith traces a huge transition in the law and in the larger cultural context. In times past, he explains, both divorce and marriage were considered matters of intense public interest. But at some point, the culture was transformed, and divorce was reclassified as a purely private matter.

Tragically, the church largely followed the lead of its members and accepted what might be called the “privatization” of divorce. Churches simply allowed a secular culture to determine that divorce is no big deal, and that it is a purely private matter.

As Smith argues, the Bible is emphatic in condemning divorce. For this reason, you would expect to find evangelical Christians demanding the inclusion of divorce on a list of central concerns and aims. But this seldom happened. Evangelical Christians rightly demanded laws that would defend the sanctity of human life. Not so for marriage. Smith explains that the inclusion of divorce on the agenda of the Christian right would have risked a massive alienation of members. In summary, evangelicals allowed culture to trump Scripture.

An even greater tragedy is the collapse of church discipline within congregations. A perceived “zone of privacy” is simply assumed by most church members, and divorce is considered only a private concern.

Professor Smith is concerned with this question as a political scientist. Why did American evangelicals surrender so quickly as divorce gathered momentum in America? We must ask this same question with even greater urgency. How did divorce, so clearly identified as a grievous sin in the Bible, become so commonplace and accepted in our midst?

The sanctity of human life is a cause that demands our priority and sacrifice. The challenge represented by the possibility (or probability) of legalized same-sex marriage demands our attention and involvement, as well.

But divorce harms many more lives than will be touched by homosexual marriage. Children are left without fathers, wives without husbands, and homes are forever broken. Fathers are separated from their children, and marriage is irreparably undermined as divorce becomes routine and accepted. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin, but it *is* sin, and it is a sin that is condemned in no uncertain terms.

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Mark A. Smith, “[Religion, Divorce, and the Missing Culture War in America](#),” *Political Science Quarterly*, 125:1 (Spring 2010). [pdf file]

I interviewed Professor Smith on this week’s edition of “[Thinking in Public](#).” Listen [here](#).

An unusually honest and eloquent statement of evangelical concern and repentance on the scandal of divorce was adopted as a resolution at the 2010 Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Orlando, Florida. The chairman of the Committee on Resolutions was [Dr. Russell D. Moore](#). The text of the resolution, “[On the Scandal of Southern Baptist Divorce](#),” can be found [here](#).

